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Uses and abuses of history: A case of a Comme des Garçons fashion show

Keywords

Comme des Garçons
discourse
image
prison uniform
nazi-chic

Abstract

The 1995 Comme des Garçons fashion show, Sleep, *provoked widespread controversy in media commentary at the time. The author analyses the origins and consequences of the censorship that resulted in the collection not only physically disappearing, but also in almost all of its traces having been eliminated. This study attempts to show how visual materials were reinterpreted through different media using a few photographs from the show and documentary materials from Auschwitz concentration camp. Discussing the Comme des Garçons case, the author refers to Michel Foucault's notion of discourse to demonstrate how interpretations proliferated and changed during the period following the show. Most importantly, it shows how memory operates depending on the context: not only how images may be evoked by clothing, but also practically constructed by it. This article recalls that blue-and-white striped pyjamas are an iconic image: often used in popular culture – such as film – they became a widely recognized image of prisoners in Auschwitz concentration camp. Finally, to situate the Comme des Garçons fashion show in a broader context, the article refers to the 'Nazi-chic' phenomena, meaning a style referring to images of Nazi Germany.*

On 27 January 1995 during Paris Fashion Week, the Japanese fashion house Comme des Garçons presented a men's collection entitled *Sleep*.[1] Among the clothes presented were a number of trouser/jacket sets. Each set consisted of loose blue-and-white, vertically striped trousers paired with buttoned-up shirts and sometimes loose, grey jackets – each printed with large, five-digit numbers on the back, at hip height. Rei Kawakubo, founder of the fashion house and its artistic director, had created a collection the subject of which was simply 'sleep' (McCrystal 1995), with garments intended to resemble classic male pyjamas. The fashion show provoked extraordinary interest not only in the fashion media but also in the wider media (Hume 1995). The most important French television channels (including TF1 and France 2) showed footage juxtaposing fragments of the Comme des Garçons collection with archive photographs taken at the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. Also, important for the media interpretation of the show was its date, which quickly became juxtaposed with the historical date of liberation of the concentration camp; on 27 January 1945, exactly 50 years earlier, the soldiers of the Soviet 60th Army of the First Ukrainian Front opened the gates of Auschwitz.

Without determining whether Comme des Garçons acted deliberately or not, it is still possible to look at the media reaction as a set of discursive statements that produced and proliferated a certain way of understanding the fashion show. The case of *Sleep* demonstrates the multi-faceted ways in which material clothes, their representation, and statements flowing from them are entangled. In order to capture how such statements emerge and interact, the aim of my analysis is thus not so much the answer to the question 'how it really was?' but an attempt to analyse the discourses in which the show has become embroiled. I draw on a Foucauldian conception of discourse in this paper, an approach well-suited to analysing the media debate that surrounded the show. Michel Foucault (1972 [1969]: 26–27) defined discourse as a system of human announcements within which objects constantly emerge and transform. Using the book as an example, Foucault paid special attention to its relational nature: the book was enmeshed in a dense network of references to other books, texts, and sentences (1972 [1969]). Referring to Michel Foucault's conception, I will concentrate firstly on 'genealogical analysis' of discourse, paying attention to its very formation, and secondly on its critical analysis. Discourse is not, however, limited solely to written text. Moving across today's media, this article considers discourse in the broadest possible sense – consisting of verbal as well as visual signifiers, because, as Myra Macdonald notes, 'etching themselves into popular memory, images reproduce discourse long after words have faded' (Macdonald 2003: 4).

In the Comme des Garçons case, the influence of images is based on their mainstream recognition, wide circulation and emotional impact. The striped pyjamas from the collection operated as iconic pictures: 'images that you see again and again in the historical tableaus of the visual media: whether on the cover of the pictorial history of the twentieth century' (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 5).

1. Fall–Winter Paris Fashion Week takes place in March or between February and March.

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However, Peter Smith, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, said: "Local authorities' incapacity to pay as read. It is misleading to say that difficulties arise from local authorities' incompetence. It is also misleading to suggest that schools have enough in reserve to meet the shortfall. In the past local authorities can be accused of having cried wolf. This year the wolf is real."
Some teachers' unions are already forecasting unrest in the schools, which could include staff refusing to teach classes which have more than a specified number of pupils.
Local authorities will take the brunt of unrest in the schools if they are unable to fund the money for the pay award. Graham Lane, education chairman of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities, said that, if Mrs Shephard was unable to fund the award, she should ask the review body for proposing an unrealistic figure. If she could not veto the award, she should resign.
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partment of Trade and Industry, which said that now the pits had gone, the bank had moved on to dealing with the properties and buildings left above ground, and redundant equipment. The bank is not expected to complete the
Outrage at 'death camps' pyjama fashion
By Cal McCrystal
AN EXECUTIVE of Comme des Garçons, the fashion house, yesterday blamed a "terrible coincidence" for a furore over clothes in a recent Paris show which some critics have likened to the uniforms of Auschwitz victims. The World Jewish Congress has condemned the show and may issue a formal protest tomorrow. In the show, which opened in the Place Vendôme on 27 January, two men with shaven heads modelled striped pyjamas bearing numbers. The 50th anniversary of the relief of Auschwitz was on many people's minds.
Interviewed yesterday, the head of Comme des Garçons in Paris, Adrian Joffe, sounded distraught. "We have 80 outfits and it was just the first two in striped pyjamas that have caused the trouble," he said. "It was totally unintentional".
The "coincidence", he said, was the fact that the show opened on the very day on which those who perished in the Holocaust were being commemorated in ceremonies in many countries, including France. "But nobody made the connection," Mr Joffe said: "The theme of the display was simply 'sleep'."
The designer, Rei Kawakubo, on the other hand, is more inscrutable. "The meaning is there is no meaning", she is quoted as having said – adding that she had always deeply respected the Jewish people.
Mr Joffe hopes that on hearing a full explanation, the World Jewish Congress will not issue its formal protest tomorrow. But Serge Cwajgenbaum, the Congress's secretary-general for Europe, who viewed the collection on Friday, is known to be concerned about the increasing use by fashion houses of Second World War iconography. Including Nazi uniforms, insignia

Figure 1: Cal McCrystal, Outrage at 'death camps' pyjama fashion, Independent on Sunday, *5 February 1995; Fot.: Herbie Knot.i.*

As Hariman and Lucaites note, iconic photographs fulfill important functions in public life, especially the Holocaust images:

> Their extraordinary historical circumstances, moral weight, and traumatic impact, as well as their specific relationship with Jewish identity, all combine to create a visual history that is, though still representative of modern journalism and public culture, virtually unique.
>
> (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 7)

Iconic pictures are reproduced in many different media – television, books, cartoons, displayed in exhibitions and analysed by scholars. It is almost impossible to control the images' dissemination; they are easily accessible and suited to mass collective memory. This can be also the source of problems. Iconic pictures do not only document different events but also produce the truth, depending on different ideologies.

The Comme des Garçons case is one of two famous examples of censorship in the fashion world (the second case involved the Chanel fashion house, to which I will return later), where an attack on a clothing collection made it disappear not only physically, but also obliterated almost all of its traces (especially the visual ones). Even though the event has been mentioned in various, sometimes lavishly-illustrated, books, these are limited solely to describing the show without the images. The destruction of these images was so effective that reconstructing the course of events is practically impossible today, because of the lack of images from the whole show and because of a scarcity of texts describing or rather interpreting this event. Preserved material about the show includes mainly articles and short commentaries form newspapers and magazines, often available only on microfilms. The disappearance of images is exemplified in Harriet Quick's article 'The Pyjamas Game', published on 3 February 1995 in the British daily newspaper *The Guardian*, which can be found in the paper's digital archive.[2] Quick wrote about the Paris autumn/winter menswear shows, including *Sleep*. In the middle of the text, just below the photo from Dries van Noten's fashion show, is an empty space. The only information that was retained included the photographer's name (Chris Moore) and a caption under the absent image: 'Conservative trends on the Paris catwalks for day and nightwear: Dries van Noten (top) and Comme des Garçons' (Quick 1995).

Object and image

Although cultural artefacts are the starting point of this article – in the form of Comme des Garçons garments presented on the Parisian runway – these were subsequently manipulated in ways that were not connected to their ostensible use. Consequently, this article considers clothing as two

2. Accessed at the University of Oxford library.

registers – first, as an object and second, as an image. Martin Heidegger (2002 [1950]) draws attention to the duality of object and image in his analysis of peasant boots, a common type of equipment. The subject of his analysis is not, however, an actual pair of shoes, but rather a particular representation of those shoes in a painting by Vincent van Gogh, *A Pair of Shoes* (1886, 1887 and 1888). The boots painted by van Gogh, and later analysed by Heidegger, are not only a useful representation of the garment but also a source of knowledge:

> The equipmental being of equipment was discovered. But how? Not through the description and explanation of a pair of shoes actually present. Not through a report on the process of shoemaking. And not through the observation of the actual use of shoes as it occurs here and there. Rather, the equipmental being of equipment was only discovered by bringing ourselves before the van Gogh painting. It is this that spoke. In proximity to the work we were suddenly somewhere other than we are usually accustomed to be. The artwork let us know what the shoes, in truth, are.
>
> (Heidegger 2002 [1950]: 15)

For Heidegger the image is not a supplement but an important element that reveals the object's 'Being'. In *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* W. J. T. Mitchell (2005b) points out 'If there are no images without objects (as material support or referential target), there are no objects without images' (Mitchell 2005b: 108). The clothes that appeared at Comme des Garçons fashion show will be analysed in terms of their image, or the social role ascribed to them, as well as their 'meaning', which became the subject of discourse in the media.

From this perspective, fashion shows are a chain of mediations – discourses understood not so much as statements and texts, but rather referring to their visual aspects. Their meaning is, therefore, constructed rather than given; it does not reside in the object (e.g. the clothes), but results from a multi-layered process of interpretation. In order to understand it Stuart Hall (1997) proposes the figure of the 'cultural circuit', which shows that meanings can be built in parallel by various individuals and institutions at many levels of practice. As Hall notes, in the process of constant production of meanings, a particular role is played by the media 'especially these days, in the modern mass media, the means of global communication, by complex technologies, which circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history' (Hall 1997: 3). The process described here questions categories such as the source or the origin, which already seem drastically unfit for describing today's phenomena. Thus, both the production of meanings and their reading are no longer permanently ascribed to an author (e.g. a designer behind a given collection) whose death was already announced more than twenty years previously by Roland Barthes (1988 [1968]).

Caroline Evans (2003) aligns Comme des Garçons' *Sleep* collection alongside other twentieth-century fashion shows whose themes and/or modes of presentation reference historical events. Comme des Garçons, frequently called an avant-garde or conceptual brand, tends to attract much media interest when it presents its collections, which have been variously commented upon, with examples including 'Hiroshima chic', 'Post Hiroshima' and 'The Day After' (Kawamura 2004: 125). These are just some of the terms coined to describe the specific aesthetics of the clothes, fitting not only within the canons of aesthetics that existed at the time, but also into the language available for their description. Additionally, from the outset the brand has meticulously controlled its image in the media, through avoiding promotion in popular magazines, for example. This strategy resulted in the creation, in 1988, of *Six*, a Comme des Garçons' publication in which fashion merges with other artistic forms. Placing the publication in the broader context of the brand's avant-garde practices, Michael Stone-Richards (2008) compares this biannual magazine with the innovative artistic practices of Surrealists. He describes *Six* as a laboratory of ideas, 'ideas which will then take on a life of their own in different forms (lines in furniture, clothing, interior architecture, photography, no less than dance in at least one case)' (Stone-Richards 2008: 102).

As Caroline Evans (2003) notes, in the late twentieth century, not only more experimental designers, but also more mainstream ones began to take on 'difficult' topics, which often evoked traumatic events from the past. According to the author, the Comme des Garçons *Sleep* collection (1995) reflected the fact that fashion, by its very nature, is inscribed in a constant dialogue with the past. Evans refers to various understandings of 'history', among them those of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, both of whom viewed history not as a linear whole, but rather as a space of discontinuities and dispersion. Probably the best example is the montage method represented by Walter Benjamin in his *Das Passagen-Werk/Arcades Project* (1999 [1940]), which consists of a long and short sequence of fragments from other writers, mostly nineteenth-century, French and German. Arranged in sections, they are interwoven with segments of critical commentary by Benjamin himself. This approach played a major role also in the works of Michel Foucault, who emphasizes that 'attention has been turned, on the contrary, away from vast unities like "periods" or "centuries" to the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity' (Foucault 1972 [1969]: 3). It is worth mentioning that Walter Benjamin himself used fashion to illustrate his conception of a 'tiger's leap' into the past. In this perspective fashion works through its method of quoting styles from the past in the present. Using old elements in new way, fashion endlessly rewrites history (Benjamin 1999 [1940]: 252–53). Evans discusses how analysis of contemporary fashion, including that of Comme des Garçons, allows one to 'track such temporal relays by finding traces of the past in the present that are articulated through visual means' (Evans 2003: 12). Analysis of selected works can therefore contribute to a broader understanding of cultural processes.

Media discourse

Juxtaposition of visual materials was a central strategy employed by the media to make connections between the Comme des Garçons show and events that took place over fifty years earlier. The role of images in the age of pictorial reproduction was described by John Berger (1972). He drew attention to the fact that meaning is no longer permanently ascribed, but frequently subjected to modifications or even changed entirely: 'It is not a question of reproduction failing to reproduce certain aspects of an image faithfully; it is a question of reproduction making it possible, even inevitable, that an image will be used for many purposes' (Berger 1972: 24–25). The subsequent removal and destruction of both the images and the clothes of the *Sleep* collection, eliminated the possibility of new interpretations. Thus, the meaning of photographs from the fashion show, as with any other reproduced image, can change depending on their company – on what is placed before or after. Positioning the picture alongside others, adding a caption or commentary, or even the context in which the image appears – such as a particular newspaper or TV programme – can change the meaning of an image (Barthes 1996 [1961]). The question then becomes: who controls the dissemination of the images?

One of the first English language articles supporting the interpretation of a direct connection between Comme des Garçons' clothes and the concentration camp uniforms appeared several days after the fashion show in the global edition of the *International Herald Tribune* under the title 'Auschwitz Fashions Draw Jewish Rebuke' (Menkes 1995). Suzy Menkes, a well-known fashion columnist, drew attention to the most controversial elements of the *Sleep* collection: 'The striped clothes, and others bearing prints of identification numbers and marks of military boot prints, were shown on Jan. 27 during the French menswear fall–winter season.' Menkes' article presented a little-nuanced description of the collection, in which the numbers on jackets become identification numbers, and the footwear gained a military character. The elements described by the journalist drew direct attention to former French interpretations of the show, underlying the war-related references of the collection.

Amongst the materials preserved, images can also be found. A photo from the *Sleep* show also appeared on the first page of the Saturday edition of British newspaper the *Independent*, illustrating an article entitled 'Outrage at "death camps" pyjama fashion'. The photo shows a male model in striped trousers and shirt, and light shoes showing his feet – a look very distant from the aforementioned associations. Similar elements of clothing presented at the Comme des Garçons show are absent from Menkes's description. The author, in contrast to her previous fashion show reviews, concentrated not on describing the collection or trying to find the source of its designer's inspiration, but assumed that all facts regarding the collection were already known. She juxtaposed it with other collections, related to war and religion, which brought about similar media controversies. Menkes

associated the *Sleep* show with one of the earlier shows by Comme des Garçons, which, as she notes, also exposed Comme des Garçons to criticism. Its 1994 women's collection was sewn from fabrics made from former military uniforms. Dark, dirty colours, epaulets, large pockets and the appearance of torn fabrics led to unequivocal interpretations. The setting of the show, that is, the accompanying music and the space where it took place, as well as the clothes themselves, were associated with the then on-going conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The interpretation of the show, repeated in subsequent press articles that duplicated the content of the first reaction, was based not so much upon direct experience (as some of the commentators were not present at the show), but rather on photographs of a couple of selected designs. It is worth noting that the entire collection presented that day consisted of 80 sets of clothes. As some of the commentators pointed out (although these views did not sway public opinion), the significance of the show was much more nuanced than suggested in the majority of articles. As the scandal intensified in media discourse, it was accompanied by changing descriptions of the fashion show's alleged content. Numerous accounts stressing that the numbers did not appear on any of the striped sets, that many models had long hair, and that the marks were left by sneakers, contradicted the aforementioned French and British opinions (Brubach 1995). The most significant example is Harriet Quick's *Guardian* article cited above. This article included, among other things, a description of Comme des Garçons collection: 'By the time of the Comme des Garçons show, the conservative trend had been translated into a conceptual vision. Men in pyjamas was the theme here: comfortable pyjamas worn with long-sleeve alpaca sweaters with fey lemon and lilac opera slippers and tweed dressing-gowns' (Quick 1995).

Reactions

Photographs from the *Sleep* show also attracted the interest of Serge Cwajgenbaum, General Secretary of the World Jewish Congress, who decided to see the clothes himself in the main Paris headquarters of Comme de Garçons. After the visit he admitted that some of the clothes were offensive and could provoke negative feelings (Menkes 1995). Adrian Joffe, managing director of the brand, and Rei Kawakubo's husband, spent a week after the show giving interviews to radio and television stations explaining the sheer coincidence of the dates and the disturbing similarity of the clothes. The fashion house denied accusations that the collection was directly related to concentration camp uniforms. According to the representatives of Comme des Garçons, the fact that the show took place on the anniversary of liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp was a 'totally unintentional […], tragic coincidence' (McCrystal 1995). The official apologies stressed that the effect was inadvertent, 'unintentional' and 'accidental'. A week after the show, Cwajgenbaum announced, however, that 'the striped pyjamas presented by emaciated models have awakened images of a

nightmare' (Boulay and Peyret 1995) and consequently the 'series of clothing, called "sleep" ought to sleep forever' (Meskens 1995). Comme des Garçons in response to the official condemnation of the designs decided to destroy not only the controversial clothes presented at the show, but also all images associated with the collection.

The case of the Comme des Garçons fashion show clearly demonstrates how a field of discourse, i.e., description of events, develops over time. Michel Foucault (1972 [1969]: 35) underlines that discursiveness should not be looked for 'in the coherence of concepts' but in their 'simultaneous or successive emergence, in the distance that separates them'. In other words, coherence should be sought not among pronouncements on the show, which frequently were incomplete or even mutually contradictory and which changed over time, but rather among the tensions occurring between them. Study of this 'interplay of appearances and dispersion' (Foucault 1972 [1969]: 35) draws attention to the fact that we are not dealing with something definite, certain and uniform. The case of Comme des Garçons shows that discourse is a space in which power relations are negotiated, and the statements emerging within it are also subjected to various exclusions. Although the discourse was diversified by different points of view, not all statements formulated in this case held equal attention. They were not even criticized or judged but simply rejected and excluded from the public debate.

Comme des Garçons' case was not the first example of iconoclasm in fashion, that resulted in the entire collection and its traces being eliminated. Only a year earlier a similar situation had occurred with Chanel, which presented a collection featuring an evening gown with its front embroidered with Arabic words. Dubbed by the press as 'Satanic Breast', the collection was fiercely criticized by Muslim organizations that recognized the embroidery as Quranic verses. A couple of days after the event took place, Karl Lagerfeld announced: 'We would like to officially apologize […] and to let it be made known that we have destroyed the dresses thus embroidered, as well as all the negatives of the photos taken of these dresses' (cited in Brozan 1994). A symbol of this event became a photograph of the model Claudia Schiffer in a very low-cut dress with a corset embroidered with quotes. Karl Lagerfeld, like Rei Kawakubo, denied allegations that he used the verses from the Quran knowingly. According to him, the quotations came from a love poem devoted to a maharaja, which he found in one of the books at the Taj Mahal palace (Dirix 2010: 71). In her article devoted to usages of non-western iconography by western fashion designers, Emanuelle Dirix (2010) views the problem of the Chanel fashion house's designs as similar to many others that she invokes in the text.[3] She sees them mostly as reflecting tension between the East and the West, when the source of inspiration originates from a distant culture, and from the use of certain motifs and symbols. When incorporated into Western fashion, non-western elements are transposed into inappropriate forms, frequently skimpy outfits, which are mostly worn by white-skinned, very thin models. According to Dirix, the Chanel collection can be interpreted as an unintentional mistake resulting mostly from

3. Emanuelle Dirix analyses, *inter alia*, works of designers such as: Matthew Williamson, Jean Paul Gaultier, Roberto Cavalli, Crazy Horse, John Galliano, Hussein Chalayan, and Walter van Beirendonck.

linguistic differences. The aim, however, is not to defend the designer, but rather authenticate his mistake as likely resulting from inadequate research into the collection's topic (Dirix 2010: 71).

However, while a lack of knowledge of the true origin of the Arabic script may seem understandable in the Western culture, ignorant use of concentration camp iconography in the case of the Comme des Garçons show was harder to believe for many observers and commentators. Although from the perspective of the majority of Europeans the concentration camps are commonly known historical fact, the perspectives of non-European countries are undoubtedly different. Detailed solutions that were the result of the Nazi ethnic policy in several European countries are probably not integrated in the cultural memory of Japan as they are in the West.

Iconic pictures

According to the commentaries quoted above, readings of the Comme des Garçons' show were based on similarities between clothes, uniforms and the coincidence of dates. However, elements such as shaved heads, emaciated bodies and sad facial expressions invoke a much broader visual similarity: not only through the striped pyjamas, but a set of characteristic features of the models. What we get is a general picture of what a concentration camp prisoner looked like. Most important are the clothes unambiguously associated with a two-piece, blue-and-white striped set, whose sources date back to the eighteenth century (Pastoureau 2011 [1991]). Initially used in the American prison system, they were quickly adopted in Europe as well. Blue-and-white or black-and-white stripes, horizontal, vertical, or even chequered, were supposed to differentiate prisoners from guards, but also more broadly from society, visually stigmatizing and separating them. As Juliet Ash (2010: 25) notes, uniforms have deep symbolic meaning: 'black-and-white horizontal stripes represented prison bars that not only surrounded the inmate but were also imprinted on the convict's body and thus became an embodiment of imprisonment'. The uniform would thus refer to the metaphor of a ladder as a rehabilitation process, gradually moving the prisoner from the lowest steps to the metaphorical top, in other words, returning the individual to society.

The Nazi prisoner uniforms were inspired by German prison uniforms used at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The image of the Auschwitz-Birkenau prisoner in striped pyjamas is repeated not only in documentary film footage and photography, but also in many film productions today. A good example is the 2008 American film, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Mark Herman, 2008), based on John Boyne's novel of the same title (2004). One of the protagonists is an 8-year-old concentration camp prisoner, whose appearance fits the description above: he wears blue-and-white, vertically striped trousers paired with buttoned up shirts, has a slim body and shaved head. This common image, repeated in many visual materials, is discussed by Maria Jezierska (1963) in a text *Moda w Auschwitz/Fashion in Auschwitz*. From her recollections and similar accounts we can advance a thesis

about the construct of 'prisoners in striped uniform', rather than the actual prisoners' appearance (Jezierska 1963).[4] The clothing, designed to be prison uniforms, fulfilled its functions in a very limited way. Due to heavy wear that resulted from difficult conditions, the uniform was usually quickly supplemented or replaced with other elements of clothing. Prisoners' clothes also differed depending on the place of detention. However, as Jezierska points out, a much more frequent occurrence than the blue-and-white striped uniform was a completely haphazard set of clothing, often pieced together from overly large military uniforms, blankets, and rags (Jezierska 1963: 5).

The reproducibility of the image of the 'concentration camp inmate', whose typical attributes are shaved head, thin body and characteristic striped uniform gives the inmate a status of an iconic picture, i.e., a representation that seems to reflect the very essence of some event, thus eliciting a broad social response. As Hariman and Lucaites observe: 'They are created and kept in circulation by media elites, they are used in conjunction with the grand narratives of official history, and they are nothing if not conventional' (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 38). Thus, iconic pictures fulfill important social functions: they create frames of interpretation and assist in understanding the past. They also become records of collective memory and are used as such. It is still important to note that the blue-and-white striped Nazi camp uniform was not implemented as a complete project; not all prisoners received it. Probably largely due to the costs of such an undertaking, complete standardization did not take place.

The Nazi project, which eliminated clothes and replaced them with prisoners' uniforms, albeit unsuccessful in concentration camps, became the most common image in collective memory. As Susan Sontag points out, the problem is not that we remember through photographs, but rather that only they are remembered (Sontag 2003: 89). The image of a striped uniform, established in films, books, and on television, came to function as the only one. It was also invoked as such in the context of Comme des Garçons show, immediately referring to commonly known events and clichés of the visual layer of the camp uniform. Thus, the white-and-blue striped sets became uniforms not because they were so designed by the Germans, but rather due to the reproduction of their representations.

The destruction of the images from the show was so effective that reconstructing the course of events is practically impossible today. To some extent, the difficulty in obtaining the visual material can also be attributed to the fact that in the mid-1990s the development of the Internet, as we know it today, had only just begun. One of the breakthrough moments took place on 18 July 1992, when the first photograph appeared on the Internet.[5] Perhaps the Internet was not the first place that the materials from Comme des Garçons' show reached. It appears that all photographs on the Internet most likely came from images scanned from the magazine in which they originally appeared. The Comme des Garçons' show took place at a time when fashion existed primarily in print media. Although fashion shows were presented on TV from the 1980s onwards, newspapers and magazines

4. I owe this insight to Karolina Sulej.

5. The photo features a pop group Les Horribles Cernettes, established in 1990 by Michele de Gennaro, then a graphic designer at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN).

were the leading source of information about fashion at the time. The new media did not overtake print media until the end of the 90s. The show took place in the transition period, when publishing photographs on the net was already possible but was not common practice. Thus, the effectiveness of censorship was related to the development of information technologies. Before the advent of the Internet, this was particularly effective. Consequently, the images were not widely disseminated, something that would not occur today.

Displays and fashion shows

Mieke Bal (2008) analyses art exhibitions using various terms borrowed from other artistic practices, introducing, amongst other things, the category of *mise-en-scène* (placing on stage): the design aspects of a theatre or film production (for example composition, props, costumes, as well as sounds, and lighting). This notion constitutes a useful figure for experiencing an exhibition, as it reflects the connection between members of the public and the exhibited art. It is, according to Bal, possible mainly thanks to the appropriate arrangement of space and through assigning an appropriate time and place (Bal 2008: 19). The space of a fashion show, similar to that of an art exhibition, on the one hand 'isolates the viewer and the art' but on the other hand 'isolates the viewer *from* the art' (Bal 2008: 19). *Mise-en-scène* allows only a very limited contact. At the exhibition, the distance is established by a straight line (imagined or physical) placed before the object, and at the fashion show the border is the edge of the catwalk. The art exhibition, however, places immovable objects in a gallery space, putting the viewer in motion. The viewer moves along the path that the curator has established for him/her. The space of the catwalk is a mirror image of the situation; it is a stage distant from a viewer sitting in the darkness, who can observe only silhouettes moving before his/her eyes. This brings to mind the crucial but frequently omitted element, namely 'mutuality'. Although the viewer cannot directly influence the situation in which he/she participates, the meaning of the show and its interpretation is a result of interaction between the catwalk and the public. Thus, as Bal puts it, both sides are empowered: 'images can act on us as much as we can act on them' (2008: 35). It should be nevertheless underlined that in the case of a fashion show, unlike the case of an exhibition, the participants are only a small, selected group of people. For the remaining majority a fashion show is available only through pictures and video footage.

A fashion show, similar to an art exhibition, spatially separates the viewer from the object. Andrzej Leder called the fashion show a 'quintessence of visuality', thus pointing out the predominance of visual over tactile experience (Leder 2004: 25). Clothing designs appearing at fashion shows have for a long time been only objects created to be watched. Frequently designed for just one event, they are usually not for sale; instead, they sell the image of the brand. Karl Aspelund (2009) describes contemporary fashion shows as the best illustration of hyperreality. Referring to the ideas/concepts

of simulation and simulacra formulated by Jean Baudrillard, he indicates that clothing presented at fashion shows is currently only a fantasy and has no relation to 'reality'. The best example of this are John Galliano's shows for Dior, whose collections are so distant from the reality of clothing as it is worn today, that they fulfill a function closer to images, sculptures, or conceptual art. The operation of many fashion houses concentrates, therefore, on organizing spectacular shows, featuring pieces of clothing that can be readily photographed and put on magazine covers. However, as Aspelund notes, 'the show's purpose, just like the purpose of couture for years, was not to sell the clothes but to be a media event to publicize the accessories, cosmetics, and perfumes associated with the label' (Aspelund 2009: 243).

It is even difficult to talk about mass manufacture of clothes, which for the sake of fashion shows are created in single copies, and only their simplified versions ever reach the shops. Mass (re)production is applied to visual materials documenting the event, and not to the actual, material piece of clothing. Thus fashion shows exist in countless repetitions on television, on the Internet, and in newspapers. This perhaps makes it easier to understand the decision, actually implemented, to destroy the Comme des Garçons' collection in both its material aspect and all its representations. As Agnès Rocamora (2009) points out, various institutions and the media who frequently use not so much material objects, but rather reproduced images, fulfill a particular role in the process of symbolic production: 'a production which is also that of the "universe of belief" which is attached to cultural artefacts' (Rocamora 2009: 55). Even though symbolic production does not change the materiality of the products, it influences their social function. The work of the media, understood in this way, is what meanings are built upon: not so much assigned permanently, but rather constantly changing through many components participating in symbolic production of cultural artefacts.

Historical documents and popular media

Rei Kawakubo, asked after the show about the meaning of her collection, replied through an interpreter, 'The meaning is there is no meaning' (cited in Struk 2004: 206). Perhaps the designer's statement is not as absurd as it might seem. Janina Struk (2004) draws attention to the exploitation of Holocaust images solely with the aim of obtaining profits. In this context she refers to Comme des Garçons, writing about 'the saturation of Holocaust images' (Struk 2004: 206), which could have deprived the fashion show of its initial meaning but also infused it with new meanings. Struk suggests that the images of the Holocaust are deliberately interwoven into various cultural forms, such as film, theatre, photography and other artistic expressions. In this perspective, the meaning of a fashion show is constructed not only through the media, manipulating the images from the collection and documents from Auschwitz, but also through the conscious activity of fashion houses. Comme des Garçons from the very beginning of its existence has had control over the means of

visual production, carefully selecting images and photographs that were due to appear in the media. But as Nicolas Mirzoeff argues, 'the effectiveness of this strategy still depended on accurate interpretation of the image' (Mirzoeff 2001: 4), the results of which are difficult to predict. This is demonstrated by the decision to destroy the clothes and their representations so effectively that they only survived in a couple of accounts from that period. Interpretation of images is even more difficult to predict, because as Mirzoeff notes, today's visual culture is not one-dimensional; instead, it is a simultaneous demonstration and interaction of various types of visuality. Thus, the very status of images here is not unequivocal: they are 'not pure visibility but highly mediated representation' (Mirzoeff 2001: 3). W. J. T. Mitchell (2005a) indicates that all media are mixed and hybridized. This of course does not mean that it is impossible to differentiate between them, because not all are mixed in the same way; the elements and their proportions vary. In the case of Comme des Garçons, as I have tried to show, evaluation of the show was based on the merging of various levels of interpretation, both photographs from fashion shows and archive footage from WWII as well as many written statements.

The grounds for condemning the show were that the place and form were inappropriate for the weight of the subject. The accusation, therefore, assumed conscious and deliberate use of images constituting 'historical documents'. Allan Sekula pointed out that the problem with indiscriminate use of such materials boils down to the fact, that 'they are transformed into aesthetic objects […] the pretense to historical understanding has been replaced by aesthetic experience' (Sekula 2002 [1983]: 448). Thus, the topic of the Holocaust does not so much benefit from being raised in the form of art, but rather is limited by such treatment.

Discussing the 'trivialisation of the Holocaust', Tseëlon (1998, 2012) points out that the use of Nazi visual vocabulary (insignia, symbols and motifs) in designer fashion can make the Holocaust seem banal. She emphasizes that discourse signifies even if, and particularly when, it is unintentional: 'To claim, as Kawakubo does, that such potent symbols can be used as images devoid of meaning … is to send a message that legitimizes a discourse that falls outside the moral domain that we share (1998: 126).

The threat of trivializing the Holocaust has already been pointed out in the context of art projects. But the projects, even though often widely criticized, still emerge as part of the legitimate freedom of artistic creation. Placed in galleries they function as art objects, even though examples show that this status does not fully protect them (see Freedberg 1991: 378–429). While fashion shows and art projects have much in common, in the case of fashion shows, we have to recognize the commercial aspect, connected to the practical function of clothing. The fashion house, in order to sell its product in a very competitive market, increasingly uses taboo techniques and topics, frequently acting on the border of what is socially acceptable. Tseëlon (1998) identified fashion as a vehicle for acting out in the 'imaginary' repressed social anxieties through taboo fantasies. Rebecca Arnold indicates that

fashion and today's fashion shows are a special space featuring both individual expression and reflection of social desires and fears (Arnold 2001). Thus, due to the taboo topics it tackles, as well as the form of their presentation, fashion moves the borders of what is acceptable by breaking social norms. As Mirzoeff notes, the effectiveness of such tactics depends on ambiguity: 'by their careful strategy of at once invoking the forbidden and disavowing it, they anticipate and in a certain sense welcome their critique' (Mirzoeff 2001: 10). The subject of attention and action here is visibility of the objects in the media space. The case of the *Sleep* show also proves that the price for visibility is constant surveillance and control to which fashion is subjected.

Nazi-chic

The controversy over the co-option of WWII iconography by fashion houses returns after each usage of elements such as military uniforms or insignia. The main accusation posed by Cwajgenbaum[6] concerns the increasing use of elements directly relating to the war. They allegedly trivialize the image of Jewish suffering, but also, more broadly, trivialize images of evil as such. 'If images are so dangerous, why do we have so many of them?' asks Bruno Latour. 'If they are innocent, why do they trigger so many and such enduring passions?' (Latour 2002: 20). The questions turn out to be particularly pertinent in the context of fashion and the power attributed to it.

Innocence has frequently been (and still is) attributed to fashion because it is believed to be unserious. This opinion can be traced back to the seventeenth century, when attention was first drawn to the banality of fashion and to the wastefulness connected with it. The view found its continuation in two of the most famous texts dealing with fashion: *Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture* by Thorstein Veblen (2009 [1899]) and *Philosophie der Mode*/*Fashion* by Georg Simmel (1957 [1904]). Clothing was supposed to be an example of the most spectacular, ostentatious waste, resulting from blind submission to its peculiarly transient models. While ascribing special susceptibility to fashion to women in particular, the authors wrote about its general power. Reworking the question posed by Latour (2002: 20): if fashion is so trivial and innocent, why does it provoke such radical emotions and aggression? Can 'unserious' fashion be suspected of possessing any power?

Georg Simmel wrote about 'the peculiarly piquant and suggestive attraction of fashion' (1957 [1904]: 558), which is capable of absorbing any content of culture: 'The man who consciously pays no heed to fashion accepts its forms just as much as the dude does, only he embodies it in another category, the former in that of exaggeration, the latter in that of negation' (Simmel 1957 [1904]: 550). Thus, fashion's power applies not only to an avid follower of fashion, but also to a person consciously rejecting fashion. The arguments from a text that is over 100 years old seem to be confirmed by Elizabeth Wilson, who wrote about the deceptive feeling of functioning outside the

6. The Secretary watches fashion shows and is famous for frequent remarks on their content. A week before the Comme des Garçons show, a reprimand also went to Jean-Louis Scherrer, who as part of an haute couture collection in Paris showed clothing referring to military German uniforms from the 1930s.

system: […] in modern western societies no clothes are outside fashion; fashion sets the terms of *all* sartorial behaviour […] Even the determinedly *un*fashionable wears clothes that manifestly represent a reaction against what is in fashion. To be unfashionable is not to escape the whole discourse, or to get outside the parameters' (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 4–5).

The absorption of WWII iconography by fashion is not just a possible threat for the future pointed out by the General Secretary of the World Jewish Congress: it became reality a long time ago. This is reflected by the special name – 'Nazi-Chic' – used for the style referring (also through clothing) to images of Nazi Germany. Irene Guenther (2004) identifies a number of examples from today's fashion, referring to Nazi, or more broadly military, aesthetics. New trends in fashion and make-up are uncritically promoted by magazines and Internet portals. A clear division between the ethical and the aesthetic aspects of Nazi iconography is demonstrated in many ways: from using symbols (for example, the swastika)[7] through military uniforms to even using images of Hitler. As Guenther (2004: 12) observes, modern fashion shows are not a history lesson, but rather a lesson in style: 'The point is that fashion has been made alternatively frivolous and dangerous by conveniently ignoring or glamorizing the historical context in which it was created'.

Using WWII iconography in fashion, however, seems to go only one way. It is difficult to find similar examples to the case of camp uniforms. It is intentionally used only in the form of art projects, as for example to the action of one of the most well-known contemporary Polish artists, Paweł Althamer. In 2010 he organized a *Marsz Duchów/Ghost March* during which a group of more than ten people, including Althamer, put on camp uniforms, caps and grey woollen blankets. The performance was organized in protest against *Marsz Niepodległości/March of Independence*,[8] which each year features hateful slogans appealing to fascist ideology. Another phenomenon, which is an example of 'Holocaust-chic' is the increasingly popular tattoos in the form of Auschwitz-Birkenau identification numbers (Rudoren 2012). These tattoos are worn mostly by grandchildren (sometimes children) of Holocaust survivors in commemoration of the tragic event. Even though the popularity of this practice seems limited, the number of 'Holocaust tattoos' has grown from just a couple of cases to a phenomenon that has been called a new trend among some young Israelis (Ludsin 2012).

Conclusion

The Comme des Garçons brand is commonly known for its unconventional way of promoting itself. Their advertisements, rarely found in popular fashion magazines, tend to present not the clothes themselves but rather a non-material idea. As such, Comme des Garçons is often referred to as a conceptual brand, whose designs are frequently presented in museums. The *Sleep* fashion show (irrespective of investigation into the real intentions of its authors) juxtaposes genocide with a

7. Every few months the media informs about another fashion design with the Nazi or Holocaust allusions. The recent examples are: Zara's 'Holocaust tee shirt', with horizontal blue stripes and a sheriff's star on the front, that bears a resemblance to concentration camp uniform, or Mango's shirt, deemed 'Nazi-chic' after social media users noticed a striking resemblance between its lightning symbol and the insignia of Nazi SS units.

8. *Marsz Niepodległości/March of Independence* is an annual march through the street of Warsaw (Poland's capital city) celebrating National Independence Day (11 November). It is a manifestation of attachment to Polish tradition and patriotism. It is organized and mainly represented by extreme right political groups.

product which has become unique and luxurious thanks to its inaccessibility. The unavailability, which characterizes the brand's strategy, reached here its full expression. The barrier is no longer created by high price alone, or even the space of the shop. The official condemnation of garments from the *Sleep* collection, motivated by the perception of fashion as actually leading to trivialization of evil, resulted in destruction of the clothes and all associated representations. This iconoclastic gesture led *Sleep* to become perfectly exclusive, not only because of its high-end availability to only a few, but by being unavailable to anyone at all.

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